Doing Difficult History as a Public Conversation: The Lynching Dialogues

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The exhibition "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America" offers a provocative example of how testimony and viewer participation alters the meaning of a photographic display. Originally photographed as trophy pictures of sensational lynchings, the images in "Without Sanctuary" were transformed by public testimony in group dialogues, online commentaries, public forums and comment books. The presentation of the same set of images in different venues from New York to Pittsburgh to Atlanta demonstrate how the conversation about the lynching photographs functioned as an important tool of public education. Using the potential of museums and historic sites to offer non-school based forms of engaged readings, the testimony elicted in public reactions to the lynching photography exhibition suggests that hostile representations can be forced into a dialogue with changed historical readings. This process of lively engagement also implies that conversation in the public sphere can be a potent teaching tool that empowers the participants and motivates them to think critically about historical evidence.

Witnessing deliberate death, either in a crowd or through surrogate images, shapes the meaning of these public killings. Images have the power to humanize and to dehumanize. And even pictures meant to dehumanize may be *seen* to another purpose. This inquiry into the audience encounter with lynching photographs raises these issues in an especially potent form. Is there such a thing as the ethical use of death images, that contrasts with the "pornography of violence" that permeates our common visual culture?

As one visitor to the New-York Historical Society exhibit "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America" commented "America must remember the smell of burning flesh, the frenzy and spectacle that strips America of its humanity." The spectacle of a mob execution of a living human being dehumanizes the viewer, yet these pictures of hanging bodies and eager crowds must be seen to mark our public repudiation of the lynching phenomenon. This conflicted attitude towards the photographs illustrates the risks and rewards possible for the viewer engaged in this difficult history. Public conversations about the exhibit demonstrated how people could bring out the meaning of history in a face to face exchange with strangers. And although academics are familiar with a growing literature on the history of American racial violence, displaying pictures constitutes a different mode of knowledge, engaging a different audience.

BACKGROUND

How did these gruesome photos end up on a museum wall in New York? Collector James Allen of Atlanta deals in Civil Rights memorabilia. In his travels around the Georgia countryside he found many examples of photographs and post cards depicting lynchings. He thought this important documentation of mob violence ought to be shown to audiences to remind them of this buried history. However, when he offered the collection of images to seven major institutions in New York, none agreed to exhibit the lynching photographs. Finally, he arranged a show in winter 2000 at the Roth-Horowitz Gallery on New York City's wealthy upper east side. One person standing in line was Betsy Gotbaum, then president of the New-York Historical Society. She realized the photographs intensely interested New Yorkers and offered to open a larger exhibit from March to October at the N-YHS.

This second venue presented the photographs in conjunction with a display of anti-lynching materials, curated by Julia Hotton. The anti-lynching movement centered in New York, spearheaded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and championed in its nationally distributed magazine *The Crisis.* Portraits of prominent anti-lynching activists such as Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Dubois and Walter White offered a reminder African-Americans challenged mob violence throughout its long and sorry history. The N-YHS presentation returned to Allen's original title, "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America," that was also the name given to the accompanying book of essays and photographs. (Twin Palms Publishers, Sante Fe, New Mexico, 2000).

The James Allen and John Littlefield collection of images range from 1889 to 1960, and depicts mob violence across the United States. Lynching victims included Asians, Native Americans, Latinos, immigrants, women and teen-agers.

[Slide Cattle Kate, Ella Watson, 1890 Johnson County, Wyoming]

However, a majority of the targets were African-American and it was southern states that hosted the largest number of incidents. Local juries rarely indicted lynchers, let alone convicted them. Yet, the unabashed crowds facing the camera in these photographs prove the lynchers were not afraid of being identified. This body of work belies the myth that lynching was primarily the secret action of a small band of hooded fanatics operating under cover of darkness.

The violent history told in the images attracted a large and active audience in New York, and museums from across the United States and Europe contacted the N-YHS to host the show in other cities. The photographs and postcards will eventually be available to researchers at Emory University in Atlanta, after an exhibition tour of several years. The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh has the images on display now until January 2002. After meeting with our museum staff, the Warhol decided to exhibit the photographs in conjunction with a history of the anti-lynching *Pittsburgh Courier.* Published by African-Americans, the weekly paper so forcefully condemned lynching southern communities often banned it and burned it. The Warhol Museum believes that the exhibit relates to its mission to expire cultural issues raised by Andy Warhol's work.

Indeed the lynching postcards resonate with Warhol's silk-screened multiples of sensational photographs, including a shot of an electric chair or one of Jackie Kennedy in the presidential limousine when the President was assassinated. Later the exhibition was framed as part of the impetus for the civil rights movement, when the photographs were presented at the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

FRAMING ATROCITY, SPEAKING of VIOLENCE

Presenting an exhibit of atrocity images is not something that comes naturally to institutions. Museums generally plan schedules years in advance, because of the necessity of raising funds, obtaining loans and coordinating gallery space. Because planning exhibits is a long-term, team-based effort, controversial topics tend to be filtered out. The development office cautions curators that depressing shows are unlikely to attract funders, no matter how worthy the subject.

The New-York Historical Society had little experience with anything as volatile as the lynching photographs. The Society immediately began to consider how it could prepare its staff to engage the public in the troubling history documented in Allen and Littlefield's collection. The group "Facing History" teaches educators how to raise controversial and disturbing historical issues in the classroom. Facilitators from Facing History came to the N-YHS and conducted training workshops, drawing on the organization's experience in airing the history of the Jewish Holocaust. The Peter Norton Family Foundation and the Gilder-Lehrman Institute for American History rapidly approved grants for public education about lynching. A packet aimed at high school students, included period newspaper articles, anti-lynching materials and historical records. Teacher resource guides addressed myths about racial violence and the interpretation of primary sources in the classroom such as letters and first person accounts. The William Greaves documentary *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* played every weekend during the run of the exhibit. From April to June, a series of conferences on "History, Memory and Denial" brought the general public into conversation with the academic community around the themes of Lynching in American History, The Anti-Lynching Movement, and Lynching in the Larger Cultural Context. The on-line magazine "journale.com" presented a web version of the exhibit and sponsored an on-going discussion forum. (www.journale.com/withoutsanctuary) In addition to the these events, the N-YHS offered week-end conversations for visitors to the exhibit, facilitated by Facing History and myself as public historian. Finally, comment books encouraged visitors to speak out.

[slide -- viewers standing close to the small images posted in a N-YHS gallery]

PUBLIC FORUMS

The powerful public response to the lynching photographs and postcards became immediately apparent in the weekend conversations. The shared feelings, reactions and interpretations created an unusually candid and probing dialogue. As people voiced their memories and placed the images in the context of American history that they themselves had lived, they fearlessly reached for a group understanding of the hateful forces propelling mob violence**.**

The meaning of the exhibit was actually forged during the public dialogues which transformed the atrocity photographs from sensational pictures into instruments of a hard-won understanding of the past. The act of telling history in a face-to-face exchange turned viewers into participants.

Museum professionals customarily rely on an array of physical techniques to give pictures coherence. Graphic design, thoughtful layouts and coordinated wall colors and framing schemes subtly cue viewers about how to read images.
But in a radical break with this tradition, *Without Sanctuary* used speech and discussion to recontextualize the awful imagery of vigilante violence. Live oral exchange helped shift the meaning of the photographs and postcards, far more than the usual apparatus of museum presentation. The images themselves remained small and faded, and viewers had to peer closely to see each representation.

In the following analysis, quotations derive from notes on the public forums, videotape, comment books and the written responses on the website. Participants in the public forums included young and old, Americans, Africans, Asians, Europeans, Middle Easterners, Latin Americans and Caribbean people. This was a young, old, urban, rural and always an interracial crowd. African-Americans seemed to know more about lynching through oral history, family connections and living memory, rather than simply through the official histories of the American past. As one person said “we black people have always known about this. We are just glad that you can now acknowledge what we know -- finally.” People of European-American background seemed to have more of a textbook knowledge, often mentioning lynching in the context of studying racial conflict and civil rights. Towards the conclusion of sessions speakers often mentioned the idea of healing a society by opening up the wounds and facing the past. Correspondingly, people frequently cited the idea of a social process of “truth and reconciliation” such as in South Africa or Argentina.

The public dialogues shaped a wide context for interpreting the images.
For example, on several occasions elderly European Jews spoke of their memories of Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. The connection between racist stereotypes splashed across newspaper front pages, and the terror attacks on the innocent echoed the comments of an older generation of African-Americas who spoke of living in fear as lynch mobs gathered and the local press wrote approving editorials about “black criminal tendencies.” At times audience members voiced a sorrowful astonishment at the similarity of the lynching regime of terror and its more familiar counterpart the Nazi genocide of the Jews. More than once people compared the popularity of capital punishment in the South and southwest to the pattern of “the death belt” in the heyday of lynching.

The exhibit opened just as New Yorkers watched the trial of four police officers accused of shooting an unarmed man named Amadou Diallo. The troubling legacy of American racial violence was underlined again and again, as people explored the past in light of current events. New Yorkers have spent several weeks processing what the media calls the first terrorist attack on American soil. However, African-Americans in Rosewood, Florida in 1923 or in Tulsa Oklahoma in June 1921 or in San Juan Hill NYC in 1900 have certainly experienced life lived in fear of terrorists.

As people spoke about the painful details of torture and mutilation, they linked the past visible in the pictures to the human dynamics of more recent events. A Filipino spoke about the bodies he saw hanging in his village after the Japanese invaded the islands in World War II. Then another audience member commented that civilians always suffer in wartime, but Americans do not usually think about their own history as one of a perpetual race war. Another person then remarked on how the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda listened to virulent propaganda on the radio before turning on each other with machetes and rifles. This conversation analyzed group violence in the past and the present in ways that made people aware of a common pattern of group hatred moving from words to bloody actions.

VIDEO Voyeurism discussion. Excerpt from public dialogue, recorded for a cable documentary on the "Unblinking Eye" series on Metro-New York TV. August, 2000.

On several occasions people asked if displaying the photos would simply begin another round of victimization. If the spectacle of human suffering once fed sadistic appetites, why should this presentation be different? One man of color denounced the interracial conversation because he felt African American people already knew about the gruesome killings and it was only white people that needed to have their eyes opened. Others spoke of how perceptions of images changed with the times. The pictures that once testified to the "legitimacy" of vigilante killings, now say something quite different to today's viewers. One set of images shows a man standing stripped and handcuffed in a wagon, his demeanor full of the dignity so conspicuously lacking in the murderous mob. The audience's ability to see the dignity of the human soul that contradicted the brutality of the representations suggests that viewers could see these photographs as something more than the intended commemoration of vigilante "justice."

Discussion often moved from immediate reactions to the display to considerations of how American society can cope with this history. As one person wrote "while remembering is only the beginning of what we must do, without that beginning there can be no other progress at all." Witnessing the photos and then speaking together about the images became two steps towards a social healing. This process was particularly moving because the witnessing on view in the photographs was of a completely different nature. The crowds gathered to enjoy lynchings and took pictures home to remember a triumphal moment. The people watching the torture and death in the photographs were not ashamed. In fact, in some cases the photos were only one of several types of trophies spectators could take home to remember the carnival of violence. Severed body parts, bloody clothes and the lynching noose appear among the sentimental mementos taken

home by vigilantes. “The photographs tell the gruesome tale of America’s darkest history. I don’t know how the local townspeople could live with themselves posing next to the dead.” -- Louis Allen.

[Slide back of postcard Robinson, Tex 1916 Jesse Washington a retarded 17-yr old killed in Waco, then burned body hung in nearby black town of Robinson “this is the barbecue we had last night my picture is to the left with a cross over it. your son Joe”]

The eagerness of the watching crowds forces today’s viewer to confront the social meaning of the lynchings. One person wrote from England, “It is the celebration and pride in these lynchings that is more shocking even than the events themselves. It also suggested an everydayness of these community murders.” After seeing these grassroots views of killings, taken as casual snapshots, the common praise of the democratic art of the cheap camera sounds sinister. Live “you are there” type photography included hundreds of Kodaks clicking at the 1915 lynching of Thomas Brooks in Tennessee, according to historian Leon Litwack. A mobile photography studio produced postcards at the site. Litwack writes, “the use of the camera to memorialize lynchings testified to the openness and to the self-righteous that animated the participants. Not only did photographers capture the execution itself, but also the carnival-like atmosphere and expectant mood of the crowd.”

And the technologies of communications fostered other instances of the ancient practice of group killing with modern means. Some mobs assembled after hearing radio announcements of a forthcoming lynching, or reading newspaper notices of impending executions. Special excursion trains sometimes brought people to the execution. For instance, in 1899, trains from Atlanta carried crowds to the nearby town of Newman to see Sam Hose tortured and burned in a killing prolonged to make the event a day’s outing. ”A picture can tell a 1,000 words. I thank god these pictures are here to tell America’s shame... it was important to see these pictures but they HURT terribly. We need to educate young people about the horrors of lynching.” --Fran Tomkin.

What does it mean to put this particularly bloody subgenre on public view? If these photographs and the conversation they provoke are so powerful, why haven’t they been prominently featured in our history and social discourse? Some spoke out against the censorship that keeps these documentary images out of the textbooks. Others believed that the images might be too painful to see.
Many spoke of protecting children from the most awful human acts. But some teens and even younger children attended the exhibit and the conversations.
Many teens said “Don’t hide the truth. We want the whole story.”
“I traveled with my mother today to see the pictures of hate and pain. I know all about this type of justice in America. I have uncles whose pictures are not here but they were killed. We as Americans must always remember this part of our history

and keep this alive, so it will never happen again..." Ruby Lee Brown Oct. 1, 2000

Furthermore, many of the discussions moved from the lynching scenes to talk of America's attitude towards reparations for the years of racial violence inflicted on African Americans. Listening to a group of strangers openly debating this controversial topic, made it clear that the circumstances of the dialogue had created an unusually open discourse within museum walls. Despite the Historical Society's enormous collection of abolitionist pamphlets, I doubt the institution had ever hosted such a cutting edge discussion of painful and divisive history.

On some occasions, rage flowed close to the surface. One visitor wrote "It was very hard for me to sit and watch my people's dead bodies on display. They look like a hunter's kill. While looking one thing kept going through my mind REVENGE!" Another called the collector James Allen a "purveyor of snuff." He went on to describe his reactions in the gallery. "Then I heard a voice, quiet at first but soon loud and resounding off the walls of the place, distracting the patrons as they stared, gaping in my direction. I looked about and behind and to the side of me to find the voice -- who IS that crazy muthaf...? to find it in my own throat: loud, plaintive and inconsolable...I fell out of my seat and onto the floor in a fetal position, shaking violently..." --Jimi Izrael.

RITUALS of MOURNING

The lynching terror reverses the social meanings of a group marking of death. The customary ritual of grief gathers people to remember the departed person; people share the memory of the person at a funeral. Group speech consoles, comforts and preserves the collective memory of the deceased.(see for example Steve Zeitlin and Ilana Harlow "Giving Voice to Sorrow" Penguin Putnam, Nov. 2001)

A lynching is also a public ritual of witnessing death. But in this case it serves to obliterate the person and his or her memory. The torture and mutilation partially serve this aim of a group erasure of another person's presence. Burning the body is a literal way of sending the message "you do not exist." Literally silencing a community through selective death, the lynching ritual deprives the victim and his community of collective speech.

The witnesses within these photos make this aim explicit. They have joined to participate in a death ritual that wipes a person off the face of the earth. This ritual disempowerment serves to increase the vigilante community's sense of its own power. Such community bonding over what Orlando Patterson has termed a "ritual of blood" should remind social historians that not all witnessing and sharing of speech is positive. The very existence of this body of work -- the lynching photographs and postcards that document the killings, the torture, the festive atmosphere and the group enjoyment -- demonstrates that images can be profanely powerful, extending the force and reach of violence.

CONCLUSION:

Why only at the turn of this century has our society been able to take these pictures and strip them of their grisly triumphalism? And how has group discussion helped remake the meaning of the lynching photographs? The lynching photographs summoned public memories that revised the original photography and rewrote its significance. Public interventions in the discourse of lynching, helped transform the exhibition from a possibly sensationalist experience into a profound lesson in civic engagement with difficult history.